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Ethics scandals reach epidemic level

Social observers warn that the fallout from a decade of excess threatens moral values

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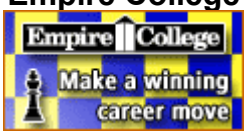

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The world may be wringing its hands in fear over the SARS virus but headlines about bad behavior at the highest levels of government, sports, business and the media have left a few people who still hold to the quaint notion of personal integrity feverishly wondering if the more threatening epidemic isn't one of public health but one of public deceit.

A rolling temblor of scandals involving accusations of lying, cheating and plagiarizing is at least tipping some of the country's largest cultural icons -- from lifestyle guru Martha Stewart and baseball great Sammy Sosa to the top editors of the New York Times.

Add to that Monday's release of former first lady Hillary Rodham Clinton's memoir "Living History," which dredges up memories of a philandering president lying about his sexual escapades in the Oval Office.

While some Americans have read the headlines over the past two weeks with a smug sense of schadenfreude -- a certain lurid satisfaction in watching the rich, famous or well-connected get their comeuppance -- some social observers say that the judgmental masses, many of whom may be fudging on taxes or calling in sick from the beach, might do well to take a moment of self-reflection.

"Sometimes we have a way of pointing fingers at others, but we don't want them pointed back at us," said Tom Harrison, a spokesman for the Josephson Institute of Ethics, a Los Angeles-based nonprofit agency

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dedicated to advancing character in the popular culture.

In fact, he said, cheating is becoming so casually commonplace that a 2002 survey of 12,000 high school students by the organization found that 74 percent admitted to cheating on an exam at least once in the past year, 38 percent said they shoplifted and 37 percent said they would lie to get a good job.

"The name of the game is whomever gets the prize wins and how they got it is almost irrelevant, unless they stumble in a way that catches the public's fancy," said Ed LaFrance, a media watcher who teaches communication studies at Santa Rosa Junior College.

LaFrance lamented that people are probably less morally outraged than entertained by Stewart's indictment for securities' fraud, or Sosa's suspension for using a corked bat, or former New York Times reporter Jayson Blair, who admitted to plagiarism and outright fabrication while unrepentantly boasting about deceiving some of the smartest people in the news business.

Jim Carroll, a Toronto-based business writer and speaker who tried to sound warnings about the impending dot-com implosion in the 1990s, said the culture sets up poor role models and deception is almost celebrated as a sign of genius.

One of the most popular movies of last year, he pointed out, was "Catch Me if You Can," about teen-age con artist Frank Abagnale, who impersonated everything from an airline pilot to a physician while passing more than $4 million in bad checks. The character, played by Leonardo DiCaprio, was largely celebrated as precocious and charming and the movie was cast as a "feel-gooder."

"Nothing could be more indicative of the challenges we've got," said Carroll, who is working on a book called "Personal Integrity: How to Get it and How to Keep It."

"We're worshiping a guy who got caught living a fraudulent life," he said. "We're worshiping all the wrong things. Maybe we need different types of heroes."

Carroll said that what we're seeing in the rash of recent ethical scandals is a symbolic "hangover" from a decade of wretched excess, when too much was never enough in the corporate culture and even small investors who eventually lost their nest eggs got greedy with overinflated expectations.

"I think collectively," Carroll said, "everybody is a little guilty here."

Carroll and others said that extreme pressure and sometimes unrealistic expectations of achievement and profit, being heaped on everyone from high school students to CEOs, creates a climate that encourages people to bend the rules.

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"For example, in business, they have what they call stretch goals," said Harrison. "They'll say, 'OK, we improved 10 percent. Let's increase it to 15 percent.' If you're the person out there knocking your brains out just to get 10 percent and your boss wants 5 percent more, there's great pressure to cut corners in either business practices or reporting."

LaFrance expressed skepticism that the wave of high-profile cheating that is grabbing headlines now, will lead to much deep or enduring reflection on honesty and ethical behavior in the culture.

"The thing about history is you're supposed to learn things from it. But we really don't. For every Martha Stewart ... there are another 100 of them getting away with it."

"Right now this is something to amuse us and for us to talk about for awhile," he said, "and then we'll move on to the next best thing. And who knows what that thing will be."

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